

Masthead Logo

The Palimpsest

Volume 30 | Number 7

Article 5

7-1-1949

Argonauts of 1849

William J. Petersen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Petersen, William J. "Argonauts of 1849." *The Palimpsest* 30 (1949), 237-240.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol30/iss7/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Argonauts of 1849

A wave of excitement swept Iowa in 1849. The Mexican War had been won, the spirit of Manifest Destiny was in the air, and the lure of the frontier beckoned men westward. To cap it all, on January 24, 1848, James W. Marshall had discovered gold in the tailrace of a sawmill which he and John A. Sutter were erecting on the South Fork of the American River, fifty miles northeast of present-day Sacramento. News of the discovery had reached St. Joseph, Missouri, about August 1st, but the first printed news in the East had not appeared in a New York paper until August 19th. Soon Iowa editors began reading about it, but apparently they shared the skepticism of many Eastern journalists, for most of the twenty newspapers then being published remained discreetly silent until Christmas time when President James K. Polk's message to Congress confirmed the authenticity of the discovery.

Excited by the prospects of sudden wealth, some Iowans started down the cholera-infested Mississippi to New Orleans, bent on reaching California by way of the Isthmus, or around Cape Horn. Others, fearful of cholera and yellow fever, went by way of New York — a trip

that was long, cold, and expensive. Most Iowans (like Moses Dillon Jordan and his Des Moines County friends) deferred their departure until spring, using the winter months to prepare for the arduous westward trek.

During these months the cry of "Ho for California!" was heard in scores of Iowa towns. "Gold," the *Davenport Gazette*, of January 11, 1849, declared, "is henceforth to flow, not only up the Mississippi" but to "shine through the interstices of the poor man's purse." Many editors, fearing town and countryside would be denuded of inhabitants, editorialized strongly against leaving sure and certain Iowa for distant and uncertain California.

Lurid tales of the fabulous wealth offset most Iowa newspaper editorials. On February 1, 1849, the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* noted that Iowa City gold hunters had formed a company for "mutual aid and protection" and were urging others to join them. The Iowa City compact was reprinted in a number of newspapers under the title "The Iowa-California Compact." Despite this invitation most communities set up their own California Clubs.

Contrary to some pioneer reminiscences, it would seem that Iowa Forty-Niners went well-organized. The Muscatine-California Emigrants' Association outlined the regulations and prescribed the type of outfit its members must own to

make the trip. Davenport, Dubuque, Burlington, and Iowa City were principal points of rendezvous, but some counties, such as Clinton, Clayton, Jackson, Henry, and Jefferson formed their own contingents which frequently joined with companies going from the larger towns.

Many Iowa Argonauts of 1849 made Council Bluffs or St. Joseph their main jumping-off-place for California, since such river towns as Burlington and Dubuque found it more convenient to ship their goods by steamboat and thus ease their load during the first leg of the voyage. Once on their way the Iowans generally followed the main northern overland route via the Platte River, South Pass, and the Humboldt River. Using prairie schooners or pack animals for transportation, they fought their way westward, enduring and sometimes dying from cholera, scurvy, and dysentery. They suffered from heat, dust, mud, deep sand, and from a scarcity of water and provisions.

Fully a thousand Iowans were among the vanguard of Forty-Niners who struck westward in the spring of 1849. These men had invested an average of about \$600 each in the venture, not counting the loss of income. The California gold rush, according to Dr. Fred W. Lorch, cost Iowans well over a million dollars.

Although the loss to Iowa in wealth and man-

power was substantial, the gains were equally important. Purchases of equipment were made in various Iowa communities from the Mississippi to the Missouri. The Dutch at Pella, for example, were saved from destitution when Forty-Niners commenced streaming through their community making purchases of food and supplies. Ferries reaped a rich harvest transporting Forty-Niners across the rivers of Iowa. Farmers, innkeepers, blacksmiths, wagonmakers, and merchants all benefited from the California Gold Rush.

Less tangible but equally important was the increased knowledge of the Hawkeye State gained by Forty-Niners. Many an Argonaut — oppressed by the hardships of plain, mountain, and desert — recalled the fertile prairies of Iowa and returned to them. Those that remained in California took leading roles in the development of the Golden State. A century of time has not diminished the luster of their achievements.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN